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AUTHOR La Pierre, Sharon D.
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ABSTRACT

The focus of this program was to explore a young Native American's artistic growth and expressiveness to gain insight into how the contemporary lifestyle of this individual was affected by traditional upbringing and values. The study examined a young Navajo woman's way of life in an attempt to discover what influences affected her ability to create as an artist, and how she coped with the influences of the past and contemporary worlds. The paper introduced the portrait study, a form of research in which a framework is applied to characterize an artistic endeavor that concentrated on one individual's personal growth within a larger community of artists as expressive spatial thinkers. The researcher attempted to become a learner socialized into the subject's world under investigation through a flexible interchange of knowledge. The study found that the participant was able to see connections between ideas and concepts very quickly and to jump from one idea to another and then come back again. This process was not sequential in nature, but rather a mental process that dealt with problem solving as an ongoing activity related to her life and to being an artist. The subject saw her Native American and artistic commitments as inseparable from her desire to speak the truth about her reality. They combined to create an atmosphere that allowed her to be expressive as an individual, but at the same time the making of art was an extension of her sense of space. (DK)

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Sharon D. La Pierre

Boulder, Colorado

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University of Denver, Denver, Colorado

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Concept Ventures, Inc.
4793 Briar Ridge Trail
Boulder, Colorado 80301-3902
303 • 530-3853
303 • 530-1295 (fax)

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Expression Anchored by Tradition: A Young Native American Artist's Struggle and Growth to be Creative

by
Sharon D. La Pierre
Boulder, Colorado

The focus of this project was to explore a young Native American's artistic growth and expressiveness to gain insight into how the contemporary lifestyle of this individual was affected by traditional upbringing and values. It was the intent of the investigator to learn about a way of life through the eyes of a young Navajo woman who had lived extensively in both the Anglo and Indian cultures. What influences affected her ability to create as an artist, and how did she cope with the influences of both worlds, past and contemporary?

This paper introduced a form of research called a "portrait" study. A "portrait" study was a framework applied by the investigator to characterize an artistic endeavor, one that concentrated on one individual's personal growth within a larger community of artists as expressive spatial thinkers. This method is a form of naturalistic inquiry that allowed the investigator to select a particular participant for the purpose of maximizing the scope and range of authentic information obtained. The objective of the investigator was to become a learner by being socialized into the subject's world under investgation through a flexible interchange of knowledge.

The findings of the study, in regard to the expressive spatial thinking process, were consistent with other results and research done by the investigator. For example, the participant was able to see connections between ideas and concepts very quickly and to jump or leap from one idea to another and then come back again. This process was not sequential in nature but rather a mental process that dealt with problem solving as an on-going activity related to her life and to being an artist. In regard to the participant's background, she saw her Native American Indian committments and her artistic committments as inseparable from her desire to "speak" the truth about her reality. They combined to create an atmosphere that allowed her to be expressive as an individual, but at the same time the making of art was an extension of her sense of space---like being home and safe on the Reservation. Art was not detached from her "whole" life, but rather, it was integrated into everything she did or thought about.

There can exist a linking of experiences through "the juxtaposition of two unlike realities combined to form an unexpected new reality" (Lippard, 1983, p. 1). The natural growth of things (as in nature) can be seen through the rhythms that are created by changing contexts and transformed into visual forms that have meaning and depth based in history. The art world is often unaware of the social meanings and connections that either imprison or free the images that an artist fabricates, especially if those images are beyond what is considered mainstream. According to Lippard (1990, p. 11), "...artists of color are struggling to be perceived as subject rather than object, independent participants rather than socially constructed pawns."

The focal point of this project was to explore a young Native American woman's artistic growth and expressiveness to gain insight into how the contemporary lifestyle

of this individual was affected by her traditional upbringing on the Reservation. It was the intent of the investigator to learn about a way of life through the eyes of this young woman who had lived extensively in both the Anglo and Native American Indian cultures. What influences affected her ability to create as an artist, and how did she cope with the influences of both worlds, past and contemporary?

This paper introduces a form of research called a portrait study. The methodology used in this study is described along with a detailed description of the participant, Melanie Yazzie, as well as descriptions of interviews and interactive activities encountered. Findings are reported and a summary and conclusion section follow.

Methodology

A "portrait" study is a framework applied by the investigator to characterize an artistic endeavor, one that concentrated on one individual's personal growth within a larger community of artists as expressive spatial thinkers. This method is a form of naturalistic inquiry that allowed the investigator to select a particular participant for the purpose of maximizing the scope and range of authentic information obtained. No attempt was made to adhere to a rigid, standard approach, but rather the investigator deliberately went "with the flow" of any given situation for the purpose of extracting data. This research method required the investigator to be open-minded and flexible and not to jump to conclusions. Thus, data "emerged" and "unfolded" from this inquiry method based on observations, conversations, and self-reports over an extended period of time. The investigator became a participant observer, allowing the subject to interact freely with her on a personal level. The roles of the subject and the investigator were not well defined. According to Stokrocki (1993), "Participant observation research is a way of observing, interpreting and analyzing everyday behaviors and experience in an attempt at understanding participants' ideas and beliefs about them." Furthermore according to Goetz and LeCompte (1984, p. 109-110), "Participant observation serves to elicit from people their definitions of reality and the organizing constructs of their world." The objective of the investigator was to become a learner by being socialized into the subject's world under investgation and to regard context and the uniqueness of the outcomes as most important. According to Eisner (1993, p. 53), "The newer research methods acknowledge the desirability of voice and the creation of a sense of authorship."

The participant was Melanie Yazzie, a Navajo artist who is concentrating in the area of printmaking. She is now 27 years old. This study started when she was 25 and consisted of numerous phone conversations, two formalized interview sessions that lasted a total of five hours (audio taped), and various other casual associations such as dinner and conversation. Part of the study was conducted in Boulder, Colorado (at her apartment) where Melanie was attending the University of Colorado getting her masters degree in printmaking and teaching courses as a graduate teaching assistant. The other part of the study was conducted in Santa Fe, New Mexico (at her home and school) where Melanie was teaching for the Institute of American Indian Arts in printmaking following her graduation from the University of Colorado.

A consent form was signed initially by Melanie allowing the investigator to use her name and explaining the research purpose and process. Due to the intimate nature of this project as a portrait study and

the fact that an artist was the subject, I made the decision to disclose the identity of Melanie in the reporting of the data. This decision adds to the integrity of the method. It strengthens the validity because of its authentic nature in regard to processing information that is idiosyncratic. The reliability of the study is limited for obvious reasons. Information cannot be generalized to other individuals unless the circumstances are exact. However, generalization was not a priority of this study because my objective was not to emulate a scientific research model. The meanings extrapolated from the data and how these could shed light from a given individual's experiences and perspectives placed a premium on how this person impacted her environment. Melanie Yazzie's experiences as an artist and as a Native American could be felt and seen in the art work that manifested itself and in the verbal reflections that were communicated during the study.

When the study was completed and rendered in written form, Melanie reviewed the material and, again, signed that the report could be published. She removed and changed several minor statements from the final report. Howe and Dougherty (1993) in an article on educational research ethics discuss the intimate nature of qualitative research and how it deviates from traditional models, thus requiring more care in its execution. For this reason Melanie's signatures and review of materials, both at the beginning and at the finish of the project, allowed her to be informed about the research process as it unfolded.

A Description of Melanie. How can Melanie Yazzie be described? She was raised on the Navajo Reservation in Arizona. Her father is a superintendent of schools on the Reservation and her mother is a teacher. She attended a Montessori school in Many Farms, Arizona as a child. Melanie's grandfather, on her mother's side, worked for the railroads. After he retired he grew corn and raised sheep from which her grandmother wove the wool into traditional Navajo rugs. Melanie spent parts of her childhood with her grandparents while both of her parents were working during the day. Melanie's father went away to a Quaker boarding school back East when he was young, and this same practice was repeated for Melanie in her high school years. After graduating from high school, Melanie went to Mexico for one year and then to Arizona State University for her Bachelor of Arts Degree in the fine arts. She received her Masters of Fine Arts Degree from the University of Colorado in printmaking and is presently teaching at the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

One would describe Melanie as an enthusiastically outspoken person whose laugh is infectious. She is a pleasantly small, robust person with beautiful dark brown features and long hair. She often dressed in jeans, a cowboy hat, and some Indian jewelry---all with an artistic flair. This personal description is significant because she referred to her appearance on many occasions during the interviews. Her demeanor displayed a sense of identity for her background, as well as a sense of practical casualness for her craft as an artist.

The Interviews and Interaction Encounters. Two formalized interviews took place. They were approximately one year apart. The first interview was conducted in Boulder, Colorado when Melanie was a student at the University of Colorado getting a Masters of Fine Arts Degree, and the other was held in Santa Fe, New Mexico where she was teaching at the Institute of American

Indian Arts on the College of Santa Fe campus. Both interviews were interactive, casual, and audio taped.

The questions asked at the first interview totaled 45 questions, and the conversation took approximatly three hours. These questions were based on a previous research project conducted by the investigator called "The Professional Artist's Thinking Style: An In-Depth Study" (La Pierre, 1992) and presented at the National Art Education Conference. These questions ranged in the nature of content from: (1) childhood experiences in art; to (2) explaining procedures for solving a problem; to (3) defining what spatial reasoning meant to the artist. These questions were developed as a result of the investigator's own experience in the arts and from previous research on the spatial reasoning process (la Pierre, 1988a, 1988b, 1990, 1993). The investigator grouped these questions into 10 categories for the purpose of reporting the findings. The categories are as follows:

1. Thinking order.
2. Learning patterns.
3. Problem solving.
4. Visualizing skills.
5. Spatial reasoning abilities.
6. Verbalizing skills.
7. Listening skills.
8. Experiences.
9. Personality trailts.
10. Working or being alone.

The second group of questions was made up of six questions and lasted approximately two hours of conversation. The questions in this group were as follows:

1. How would you define Melanie Yazzie?
2. What would you say is your main talent or talents in life? How are they expressed?
3. What most connects you to your roots? Can you list what these connections are and how they connect?
4. Where do you see yourself in 20 years?
5. Describe your moods. Do you have specific periods? What are they?
6. Because you look so Native American, does this make a difference in your life?

Other interactive encounters between the investigator and the participant consisted of numerous phone conversations, dinners, an art exhibition opening, at least three sessions of talking about and looking at Melanie's art work, and traveling around Santa Fe together.

Findings

Interview One. The responses to the 45 questions are divided into the 10 subsections as listed above. Each of these subsections examine Melanie's responses in detail.

1. Thinking order. It was determined by the responses given that Melanie did not process information in a sequential or linear manner. She acquired and retained knowledge by seeking information from older people. She worked things out in her mind like a story with ideas and details branching off, a skill that evolved from a former teacher 's instruction, in order to remember and retain information. Melanie admitted that she jumped around in a conversation, and that other people got upset with her because "they could not keep up and did not understand." She also stated that she finished others' conversations because she got excited and knew what they were going to say.

2. Learning patterns. Melanie expressed the fact that she liked to teach herself things. She said she would buy a pattern to see how it worked and then expand on it by branching off on her own. The responses indicated that Melanie had no reason to learn something unless it had meaning to her. She would cross-reference incoming data as it related to something she already knew or had experienced. She responded that she could not think with loud noises going on around her.

Education played an important role in Melanie's family values because both of her parents

were educators. However when asked the question, Did schooling enhance your thinking process?, she stated "It must have, but I could have gotten it at home if taught traditionally (meaning on the Reservation)." She said that her mind wandered a lot of the time and especially when people were talking at her, as a lecture. She preferred interactive encounters better because people were talking together and her mind was more there.

3. Problem solving. The responses indicated that Melanie liked puzzles and especially mysteries because she said "They make you think---no clear solution---can makeup own ending." Mysteries gave her a chance to solve the problem. She liked to share new ideas and explore concepts in conversations when working with someone who was as passionate about their art as she was. "I am cautious about who I say things to because I want input from someone, not someone who will drain me." However, she liked to brainstorm.

4. Visualizing skills. When asked if she could "see" in her mind, Melanie responded "yes, almost as if it is real inside my head---pictures, very vivid pictures." She said that she was able to visualize her thoughts in regard to art. She felt the image---"I 'feel' the image and see how I want it to be and then it comes out." Melanie said that she was able to "see" things from different points of view or different angles. "When I teach, I use that a lot. I see what they want and need by putting myself in their shoes."

Melanie was asked if she ever fantasized when visualizing a concept by stretching or expanding the imaginative picture in her mind so that the image seemed ridiculous? She said "yes---I always wish I could do what doesn't seem possible."

5. Spatial reasoning abilities. The responses to the questions in this section were the most interesting to me, the investigator. Melanie defined spatial as "being home." She tied her answers to the "open land" of the Reservation, like "being on top of a mesa and seeing and not having anything get in the way of the space." She felt that one did not necessarily have to understand spatial as a form of intelligent thought, but that it could be felt. She thought she was more spatial because of where she came from and her ability to experience space as landscape. These responses were definitely tied to her upbringing on the Reservation and her tremendous appreciation of the land. She internalized the concept of space as a feeling.

6. Verbalizing skills. Melanie was asked if she had a difficult time verbally forming sentences or putting words together when she was excited or passionate about a subject. She responded that she did because "It is all in my head. I see it, but can't say it fast enough." She also said that she used her hands to communicate when talking. "It gives more feeling for what I'm trying to say."

7. Listening skills. When asked if she often did not listen when spoken to, Melanie said yes. She responded that she was thinking about something else---"I'm hearing, but not listening." She also said that she had been told that she did not listen. These responses indicated that Melanie was preoccupied with her own thoughts. Melanie also indicated that she tended to interrupt other people when they were talking. She said she was constantly apologizing for that trait. This indicated that Melanie processed information quickly and anticipated conversations. She was impatient to move on because the process was moving too slowly.

8. Experiences. Melanie related that she felt different. She was never told that she was stupid, but felt at times that she was. "Formalized education helped me to think or to realize that I'm thinking. There seemed to be no reason for being formally educated on the Reservation. When I was home, I thought it (meaning formal education) was punishment. It was important at school (speaking of her experiences back East) and I studied all the time." She expressed an appreciation to her father for sending her away to school because it gave her insights into unfamiliar territory.

9. Personality traits. Melanie responded that she acted out her emotions, especially joy---all the time. When asked if she considered herself to be different or unique from others, she said "I must be because people tell me I am, especially Native people." She said that she was called the "Care Bear" by friends because her sense of reality was different from others. She said "The world isn't as great as I think it is."

Melanie exhibited a sense of optimism and personal strength. She endured in silence, but rejoiced openly when happy. "I don't want people to see that side of me (referring to bad moods), so I get away." She said that she "liked to be around people who said something important and meaningful when they spoke---people who were passionate and enthusiastic."

Melanie said that she thought best in her own space---home. "My own spot feels good because it is my space."

When asked if her art work was a product of herself and her thinking process, Melanie responded "yes--in all ways. That is where it comes from--within."

10. Working or being alone. Melanie responded that she needed her own space. "I need it so much. I am happy and busy in my own space." She also said she liked to be alone a lot. "I get tired of listening to people." Being alone gave Melanie time to regroup her thoughts, to concentrate and focus on what was important to her, to do her art work, to reflect, or to feel free. She did not mind working in a group, but preferred to do things individually. She did not mind working with an individual within a group who was passionate and who did not take time away from her experiences.

Interview Two. The six questions in this second formalized interview dealt with more personal issues. The responses and questions were as follows:

1. How would you define Melanie Yazzie? Melanie portrayed herself as Navajo and as one who speaks the truth through her art work. She said that she did not like to be the one who spoke out or who brought up issues of injustice, but "thinking about issues is being honest with self." In viewing Melanie's art work over a period of time, her work from several years ago was playful and at times whimsical. Her more recent work expresses her need to reveal social inequalities. She said that she may be avoided by others because she portrays the realities of life, but she said "I do not forget the truth to be spoken."

Even though Melanie is a physically small person, she said "looks are deceiving because I can take care of myself." She believed that people thought she could be overlooked, and she assured me that that was not the case.

2. What would you say is your main talent or talents in life? How are they expressed? Melanie listed her talents as: (1) her laughter and humor; (2) her ability to "see things" and to appreciate them; (3) her observation skills; and (4) her ability to relate to people because she can feel pain and empathy. Melanie gave an example of how she was able to see things around her and appreciate them. We were sitting in her living room in Santa Fe, a room that opened out with French doors onto a very private patio. Along the stucco patio walls she had placed bits and pieces of objects, such as glass and wooden items. She said that she was able to appreciate these found objects as the day changed and the light altered their appearances. Each piece was placed strategically to enhance the anticipated light changes. Melanie said she was able to do the same thing with people by observing them, and hence to get a sense of where they were coming from. She said "I have felt a lot of pain in life, but I have not had a hard life." She believed this allowed her to empathize with others' perspectives.

3. What most connects you to your roots? Can you list what these connections are and how they connect? Melanie stated that an appreciation of the land most connected her to her roots. "I enjoy being at home with the land, the wind---the landscape." She also felt connected to her grandparents on her mother's side because she stayed with them when her mother taught school, and she learned many things from them about the land, like raising sheep and growing corn.

Melanie also felt connected to Navajo ceremonies, even though she said she did not know much about them. However, she said she respected the concept of land and place that was exhibited by these rituals.

4. Where do you see yourself in 20 years? Melanie saw herself as "close to home." She expressed the concern that she did not want art to become so big that people could not relate to her. She did not want art to get in the way of where she went because one is not as free when well known.

Melanie also said that she wanted a family someday, but that she was too outspoken for a Native woman and that Native men had a problem with this. She expressed the fact that she wanted children to share with and to teach about art.

5. Describe your moods. Do you have specific periods? What are they? Melanie admitted that she was very moody and went "up and down a lot." She said "It is hard when I have to show people the truth, but I am positive mostly." Sometimes she said she got moody because she could see her student's potential and it made her sad when they did not push to use it.

6. Because you look so Native American, does this make a difference in your life? Melanie said that sometimes she was conscious of this, meaning her color and size, as a negative only when she was having a bad day. However, she felt her color was an advantage when she was home. She said "I do not consciously think of myself as different. People who do not know me, see me as different." She said that she struggled with her art, not to lose joy, but to maintain a sense of reality about life. "When I read art history now, I read it in the first person. This is hard because it is exploratory and it affects me because it is important to me now." She said she wanted to remember and to search out knowledge of Native Americans and what others had gone through because she felt it was similar to her experiences now.

As an interesting side note in regard to this issue, let me relate an experience I had with Melanie in Santa Fe. Melanie and I went to breakfast with another woman at a very nice restrauant. When we were seated, we were asked by the waitress what we would like to drink. The waitress never made eye contact with Melanie and only asked me and the other person what we wanted to drink. She left the table to get our drinks. I was so taken back by this that I proceded to call after the waitress, who herself was Hispanic. Melanie stopped me and said she would deal with it later. It was as if Melanie was not at the table. The other woman also noticed the situation because it was so obvious. Melanie stated that this kind of thing had happened many times before. This incident made me yearn to understand more about the complexity of ethnic issues and what the underlying factors were that took place in regard to this particular scenario. In an attempt to understand this phenomenon, I attended a play, "Black Elk Speaks," presented at the Denver Center for the Performing Arts. (1) It was a powerful play where history was redefined through Native American Indian eyes. I left the play understanding better my own upbringing and the denials that took place, as well as Melanie's upbringing where her father placed her in a Quaker boarding school. The wounds of being torn between surviving in a White world and languishing in a traditional atmosphere spoke to the audience and to me.

Summary and Conclusions

Due to the massive amount of data that was generated by this in-depth study, much information was condensed in order to draw a portrait of Melanie Yazzie. The main objective of this report was to enlist Melanie, a young Native American artist, as an authentic resource for the purpose of enlightening the educational field in regard to how her thought processes and ethnic background affected her abilities to be creative. Behavioral patterns, common areas of agreement, and insightful explanations became the norm for this project. The results were a product of triangulation of the data. This personalized research method, a portrait study, gave the investigator the opportunity to describe one individual's growth.

The conclusions from the findings were consistent with the previous research project by the investigator on professional artiists' thinking styles (La Pierre, 1992). It was concluded that Melanie exhibited the following characteristics in this regard:

1. She saw everything as it related to her own sense of creative expressiveness and her Native American background. She was egocentric, meaning that she always related concepts and ideas to herself when talking. Melanie's own opinions and how she derived them was important to her to share on a constant level of awareness. She was very conscious of the place of the individual and the will within the individual to learn. "Schools may choose ethnic tokens, but not necessarily people who want to contribute to their roots." Melanie was able to talk about problems not only as Native American, but as human problems as well. She had a deep committment to her roots and family, but she also had a great capacilty to empathize with people in general. She saw the making of her art as creating the individual by being in touch with herself and her sourroundings. Melanie could see her Native American committments and her artistic committments as inseparable from her being. They combined to create an atmosphere that allowed her to be expressive as an individual. The making of art was an extension of Melanie's sense of space---like being home and safe on the Reservation.

2. Melanie was very intense, driven, and disciplined. She structured her life and attitude around being able to pursue her creative endeavors. She exhibited a high sense of independence.

3. Melanie was able to see connections between ideas and concepts very quickly and to jump or leap from one idea to another and then come

(1) "Black Elk Speaks" was part of the 1993 theatre season at the Denver Center for the Performing Arts. It was based on the book by John G. Neihardt and adapted for performance by Christopher Sergel. Nicholas Black Elk (1863-1950) was a holy man of the Oglala Sioux, who had been given a great spiritual vision during his boyhood. To insure that the Lakota ways would not die with him, Black Elk chose to share the story of his life and details of the vision with a White writer named Neihardt. The life mission given to Black Elk in his vision was one of healing. This play was based on oral history and autobiographical materials. What made this play believable was the authenticity of the performers and the costumes.

back again. This process was not sequential in nature but rather a mental process that dealt with problem solving as an on-going activity related to her life and to being an artist. She was "feeling" oriented and often equated the ability to feel with the process of thinking.

4. I encountered Melanie's tremendous expression of energy and capacity for joy, humor, and love for living and experiencing life to the fullest. Melanie had animated actions, exaggerated speech, and sometimes extreme hand and body movements that were used to express feelings about life and art. One was very aware of Melanie's face, because it was so expressive and had a constant smile on it. She revealed herself through radiance.

5. Melanie was very conscious of the concept of reality (what she called "truth") and what that meant to her. Her art work used this theme in many instances to "speak" to the viewer. Her art was a passion that made her think about things around her, such as Native issues and family. She said, "Honesty requires looking at the whole picture when making your art work. It must have meaning, a gift, a vision."

On numerous occasions I found myself drawn into extensive dialogues with Melanie---discussing, interpreting and defining life's adventures as they related to art and culture. These conversations did not feel like interviews couched in a research atmosphere, but rather instances of trying to deeply understand the forces that moved this young woman's life and art. It is very hard to intellectualize feelings and the patterns that emerged from those feelings, but this project had a profound affect on my own life. Melanie's deep committment to the Navajo people ("her people") and her incredible ability to express artistic passion, made these interviews an extension of her own sense of "space" and this inspired me as the observer and the researcher. I found myself wanting to reclaim my own Native American roots, for my past is very sketchy and much is unknown about how I came to be Chippewa (Ojibwa); It was hidden through denial within my family because it was believed to be a disgrace by civilized society. (Birth certificates were not issued and in order for my father to get a passport, he had to have shown up in the national census from some years before.)

This research project forced me to focus on a part of my life that I had never been able to experience fully, and Melanie was able to give me an invaluable insight into this world through her life experiences and how her art flowed from her identity as a Native American. The possibility of researcher-bias always needs to be scurtinized, especially in a qualitative research design such as this portrait study. However, I can honestly state that I forgot who I was and just found myself "experiencing" this young woman's eager sense of "self." Conversations became "real" and informative. I did not distance myself through the use of traditional research objectivity, because it has no sense of signature or biographical uniquess that is so vital to the arts (Eisner, 1986).

There appeared to be no barriers created from age differences, upbringing differences, or philosophical differences. The making of art was shared knowledge between the two of us; Therefore, dialogues just flowed, and what I did not capture on paper as field notes, I did record on audio tapes to review at later times in order to render this report.

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